

Digest of a Survey of the Utah Public Education Career Ladder Program

Program Appears Beneficial but does not Represent a True Merit Pay System

The Career Ladder Program is well-supported by Utah's educational system and appears to provide a benefit. However, it does not operate as a true merit pay program that primarily rewards outstanding teachers. Rather, because of the controversy and divisiveness caused by a merit pay system, the Career Ladder Program essentially compensates teachers for curriculum and professional development activities and for assuming extra job responsibilities. If the Legislature desires a system that primarily rewards outstanding teachers, further study of program design is likely to be necessary.

The request to evaluate the Career Ladder Program came from the Public Education Appropriations Subcommittee. We interviewed personnel at the district and school level and reviewed documentation of career ladder activities to determine program effectiveness. In addition, we contacted other states and reviewed available literature to understand how similar programs operate on a national level.

Survey Findings

- The attempt to reward outstanding teachers with merit pay is generally a difficult, unpopular aspect of the Career Ladder Program. Its use has diminished significantly over the years and in many ways what is currently used in this area cannot truly be considered merit-based pay. Some states have abandoned the effort to reward individual teacher performance and instead reward teachers on a block or school basis.
- Career ladder funds are widely available to teachers and are generally used in the most popular areas of the program. Over 80% of the funds are used to compensate teachers for extra duties performed, training received, and preparation days. This use of funds seems to provide a benefit to teachers and students when properly applied.
- Some career ladder applications are questionable and may violate program intent that activities not be extra-curricular or administrative in nature. The State Office of Education should

review these practices and, if necessary, issue more specific guidelines to districts to make the program more effective.

Legislative Options

Reaffirmation of the Merit Pay Concept - If career ladder money is to be used for merit pay, the difficult nature of fairly measuring and rewarding outstanding performance must first be addressed. Districts could try using different forms of observation and assessment in the classroom, require evidence of student achievement, and specify qualifications that teachers must attain, similar to programs in some districts, as a way of measuring performance. If the Legislature is interested in a true merit-based pay program, further study of these issues will likely be necessary. At a minimum, however, performance evaluation needs to be based on objective, observable, and well-communicated criteria in order to minimize the subjectivity that often creeps into the process.

Maintaining the Current Program - The Legislature may wish to recognize actual practice among districts and schools and essentially continue the program as it is. This option recognizes the benefit of current career ladder activities and their potential impact on student development. The merit pay component of the program could even be terminated and the money redirected to more favored career ladder activities. This adjustment might at least clarify any misbelief by the public that the Career Ladder Program is a pure merit pay system. However, the State Office of Education needs to bolster program integrity by clarifying and communicating what constitutes legitimate career ladder activities.

Elimination of the Program - Finally, the Legislature may wish to consider whether the Career Ladder Program should be terminated. If this option is pursued, the Legislature would clearly need to consider the effects on educators and students. At least two options exist here:

- A. The program could be converted into more of a school-based incentive system, similar to those in other states, that rewards schools who can demonstrate certain levels of student achievement in specific areas. The advantage to this type of program is its emphasis on collaboration and collegiality among teachers rather than the competition that stems from the pursuit of individual awards.

- B. Career ladder monies could be converted into a supplement to regular teacher salary with the expectation that teachers would continue to pursue career ladder activities as part of their regular pay. This option would obviously recognize and reinforce the philosophy of dispersing career ladder money broadly. The possible advantage to this system would be in eliminating the administrative cost of maintaining a separate program. However, many educators and administrators believe this option could ultimately be detrimental because the focus and incentive to undertake and complete specific activities would likely be diminished. Also, the Career Ladder Program is very well established and doing away with it would cause considerable controversy.